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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Fiftieth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 542nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 8 October 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. PEREZ-HERNANDEZ Y TORRA (Spain)

CONTENTS

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE FIFTIETH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

CLOSURE OF THE SESSION

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE FIFTIETH SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (document without a symbol) (agenda item 11)

1. The CHAIRMAN invited the Rapporteur to introduce the draft report of the fiftieth session.

2. Mr. CHELIA (Argentina), Rapporteur, introducing the draft report, pointed out that the symbol of the Security Council resolution referred to in paragraph 20 (q) should read A/RES/1208(1998) instead of A/RES/1209(1998).

3. The report of the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee was adopted.

CLOSING STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

4. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), thanking all those who had participated in the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee, noted that the session had been attended by 160 member and observer delegations, six more than the previous year. She was particularly pleased that 40 African delegations had been present, several of them at the ministerial level. Her Office was committed to maintaining its focus on Africa and raising awareness of the plight of a continent whose crises were too often ignored or forgotten. She was also very pleased that the number of non-governmental organizations attending the session had risen from 90 to 145. The yearly increase in the number of participants was an indication of the usefulness of the Executive Committee meeting as the main humanitarian forum centred on refugees. However, it also implied a need to review the manner in which Executive Committee-related meetings were organized throughout the year. Delegations which had made great efforts to be present and to deliver thoughtful and important statements deserved a debate that was interesting, lively and interactive. Her Office would look into the matter together with the Bureau and, of course, in consultation with delegations.

5. With reference to certain points made in her opening statement, she said that emphasizing the need to preserve the neutrality of humanitarian action and the specificity of refugee protection did not detract from the importance of political backing and, at times, military support. It was the responsibility of Governments to address conflicts and seek solutions to refugee crises. The role of the military in highly complex emergencies and in special areas, such as logistics and camp construction, would continue to be indispensable and highly appreciated by all humanitarian agencies. In making that point absolutely clear, she again appealed to Governments to help civilian humanitarian agencies organize the space in which they operated, refrain from undermining them and ensure that, wherever the support of the military was needed, its precise role was jointly defined and publicly explained in clear and unambiguous terms.

6. Three broad issues referred to by many speakers and crucial to the theme of the current session issues were security, post-conflict recovery and rehabilitation, and prevention.

7. With regard to security, several delegations had mentioned the idea of resorting to a "ladder" of options to address the "ladder" of insecure situations in the context of conflict resolution efforts. Her Office was continuing to work on that issue and had submitted some proposals to the Standing Committee earlier in the year. The support of delegations was now needed in order to make the proposed measures readily accessible and implementable. Particular importance should be attached to so-called "middle" options such as equipping the local police, providing training or deploying liaison officers. While "hard" options were essentially the responsibility of States and "soft" ones that of humanitarian agencies, "medium" options had to be implemented through a collaborative effort between States and agencies. She hoped that a few pilot projects would be launched soon and was counting on the advice and support of Governments in an area which called for special creativity in forging partnerships.

8. Many delegations, especially from developing countries or countries hosting large refugee groups, had referred to the need to give greater support to post-conflict recovery and to the rehabilitation of areas affected by refugee flows. In her view, the approach to that problem should be as comprehensive as possible. Some innovative attempts were being made; in Kosovo, for example, all major aspects of a society's reconstruction had been brought together in one integrated structure for the first time. There again, partnerships were essential and new ones were being forged in the process.

9. Some of the experiences in Kosovo could serve as a useful model for other situations where the gap between humanitarian and reconstruction activities was very wide and where refugees or returnees were an important element. The situations in Rwanda, Liberia and the Horn of Africa were cases in point and East Timor might soon become another. Some speakers had expressed legitimate concerns about the international community's apparent lack of interest in dealing with that problem. Together with the World Bank, UNDP and a number of concerned Governments, UNHCR had promoted discussions on how to implement coordinated and funding mechanisms to facilitate the transition from humanitarian to development aid and to support communities while the transition was taking place. Those discussions, known as the "Brookings Process", had yielded some interesting ideas which were to be implemented in selected countries in support of existing transition arrangements. The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, if swiftly implemented, could serve as a valid model of regional cooperation in tackling reconstruction in a comprehensive manner. Other regions trying to emerge from a spiral of conflict, poverty and human displacement might usefully adopt a similar approach. She had noted positive signals in that respect in several of the statements made by West African delegations.

10. Partnership was also a key element in prevention and, in particular, in upholding, and monitoring respect for, human rights, especially where there were specific problems linked to ethnic minorities or social groups. It was gratifying that both the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Executive Director of UNICEF, with both of whom her Office would continue to cooperate very closely, had stressed that point in their statements. Many delegations had called for more support and more creative thinking in designing and implementing projects aimed at reconciling divided communities. In a world situation where the majority of refugees and displaced persons were

victims of internal conflicts, a systematic and professional approach to reconciliation, resulting in concrete projects, might well be one of the key directions to pursue in order to prevent refugee flows.

11. In conclusion, she said that the session that was ending showed not only that the Executive Committee meeting remained central to the refugee debate, but also that refugee issues themselves occupied a very central place in today's world.

CLOSURE OF THE SESSION (agenda item 12)

12. The CHAIRMAN, after inviting all interested delegations to take part in the informal consultations he intended to hold with a view to making the proceedings of the Executive Committee more dynamic, declared the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee closed.

The meeting rose at 10.45 a.m.